Macron warns Israel against West Bank annexation

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron warned on Tuesday that any Israeli plans for annexation in the occupied West Bank would be a "red line" and would provoke a European reaction.

He spoke as Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas visited Paris one month into a fragile truce in Gaza.

Abbas, 89, is a long-time head of the Palestinian Authority, which exercises limited control over parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and is being considered to possibly assume governance in Gaza under the deal.

Macron, whose country recognised a Palestinian state in September, warned against any Israeli plans for annexation in the West Bank following an uptick in violence in the Palestinian territory.

"Plans for partial or total annexation, whether legal or de facto, constitute a red line to which we will respond strongly with our European partners," Macron said at a joint press conference with Abbas.

"The violence of the settlers and the acceleration of settlement projects are reaching new heights, threatening the stability of the West Bank and constitute violations of international law," the French president said.

Violence in the occupied territory has soared since the Gaza conflict started in Oct 2023.

Over 1,000 Palestinians have been killed in occupied West Bank by Israeli forces or settlers since Oct 2023.

Constitutional committee

Following their meeting to discuss the next steps after the Gaza ceasefire, Macron and Abbas announced the creation of a joint committee "for consolidation of the state of Palestine", the French leader said. It "will contribute to the drafting of a new constitution, a draft of which President Abbas presented to me".—AFP

Afghan link

Continued from Page 1

relevant authorities for reconstruction and identification, for which Nadra's assistance would be sought.

Multiple teams have started working on the incident. CCTV footage from the Safe City Islamabad Authority and nearby buildings is being examined to trace the bomber's route to the judicial complex and identify any facilitators or handlers. Footage from bus terminals and checks at nearby hotels are also underway.

Police officials said preliminary investigations suggested that the suicide attacker came from outside Islamabad.

According to initial findings, the bomber arrived in Islamabad on Friday and travelled from Pir Wadhai to the judicial complex on a motorcycle while wearing a shawl. Investigators have collected about 92 CCTV recordings with the help of artificial intelligence during the initial inquiry.

The explosive used in the attack weighed roughly four to five kilograms and was packed with ball bearings. Officials said the attacker appeared to have acted alone, but verification was underway regarding any handlers or facilitators.

A car and a motorcycle spotted in the footage have been marked as suspicious, and additional evidence is being gathered through camera backtracking.

'Perpetrators will bear consequences'

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi told reporters outside the complex that the suicide blast took place at 12.39pm. He confirmed that 12 people had been killed and 27 were initially injured, later revised to 36.

Providing details of the incident, Mr Naqvi said CCTV footage showed the attacker waiting outside the court building for around 12 minutes. "He first attempted to go inside the court but then targeted the police vehicle after he was unable to do so," the minister said.

He added that an investigation was underway and identifying the attacker was a top priority. "I assure you we will identify him in the next few hours," he said. "We are linking this blast today with a lot of things and, in the coming hours or days, we will be very clear about it."

"We are not taking this blast as just another one," he added, noting that its timing and the federal capital being targeted "has a lot of messages".

"I don't want to say anything about how Indians do…. like where and what happened half an hour before the blast even occurs," he said.

"We will go with complete evidence and details. Whoever is involved in this, whether locals or foreigners, we will not spare anyone," the minister vowed, affirming that the state will not remain quiet on the matter. "We have a clear message that whoever did this will bear the consequences."

According to Mr Naqvi, CCTV footage showed that the suicide bomber, standing outside the court building, "kept trying to figure out from different angles how to go inside".

Responding to queries about those behind the blast, he said, "As far as this (Islamabad blast) is concerned, we will let you know as soon as this individual is identified."

Officials said the bomber looked like Pashtun or Afghan. The minister noted the injured included some police personnel, adding that the driver of the vehicle targeted remained safe. A lawyer was among the casualties, he added.

Asked about any security alerts, the interior minister replied, "There is nothing as such; routine matters are taking place."

Mr Naqvi noted that various activities were taking place in the capital, including political developments, events involving international guests and sports games. He assured the public that the law enforcement agencies, the army and the Rangers were working together to keep the city secured.

The minister said he had directed the chief commissioner not to allow any vehicles into Islamabad without an e-tag on them after two weeks.

Victims identified

Those who were killed in the incident included Iftikhar Ali, Sajjad Shah, Tariq Khan, Subhan Uddin, Saqlain, Safdar Ali, Shah Mohammad, Zubair Ghuman, Abdullah and Iftikhar Khan. Among the wounded cops were Assistant Sub-Inspector Arshad, Head Constable Mohammad Imran and Constable Imran Javed, while other injured included Nusrat Zafran, Shamsha Khizer, Shumaila and Bushra Bibi.

Security around the Judicial Complex, adjoining courts and other sensitive buildings in Islamabad has been further tightened, police officials told the state-run APP news agency. Similar steps have also been taken at the capital's entry and exit points.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and key members of his cabinet and ruling coalition met President Asif Ali Zardari at Aiwan-i-Sadr on Tuesday to review the security and political situation in the country following the Islamabad suicide blast.

According to a statement issued by the President House, the meeting condemned the recent acts of terrorism and reaffirmed that operations against "foreign-sponsored terrorists and their facilitators" would continue until the menace was eliminated.

PANAMA CITY: A Panamanian soldier guards 12 tons of cocaine divided into hundreds of packages at the naval headquarters. Panama made the seizure on a vessel in the Pacific that was bound for the United States.—AFP

Prosecutors seek 2,000 years behind bars for Erdogan's rival

ISTANBUL: Turkish prosecutors on Tuesday charged Istanbul's jailed mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, with 142 offences in a massive legal case that could carry a penalty of more than 2,000 years in jail, court documents showed.

Imamoglu is President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's main political rival and seen as the only politician capable of beating him at the ballot box, with his arrest in March sparking Turkiye's worst bout of street unrest since 2013.

The nearly 4,000-page indictment charged the popular opposition mayor with a long string of offences, including running a criminal organisation, bribery, embezzlement, money laundering, extortion, and tender rigging.

State news agency *Anadolu* said the charges would carry a prison sentence of up to 2,430 years.

The head of Turkiye's main opposition CHP lashed out at the indictment as a clear case of "judicial interference" aimed at blocking Imamoglu from running as their candidate for the 2028 presidential election.

"This case is not legal; it is entirely political. Its purpose is to stop the CHP, which came first in the last (local) elections, and to block its presidential candidate," Ozgur Ozel wrote on X.

The indictment was filed on Tuesday, with a court date to be set later.

Mayor of Turkiye's largest and richest city until his arrest, Imamoglu is facing a slew of allegations — including espionage and faking his university degree — which could see him banned from running in the 2028 presidential race.

According to the indictment, which names 402 suspects, Imamoglu allegedly headed a sprawling crime network over which he exerted his influence "like an octopus".

'Electoral fraudster?'

Before the indictment was published, Ozel had denounced the scope of the allegations.

"Can someone be both an electoral fraudster, hold a forged decree, and be a thief, a terrorist, and a spy all at the same time?" he asked.

"If you accused an innocent person of just one of these crimes, it would be a great injustice. But when you put all of them on one person, it's a major crime... But his only crime is running for the presidency of this country!" Prosecutors also said they had filed papers with top appeals court against the CHP in what observers said could pave the way for the party's closure.

In a separate statement, the prosecutor's office confirmed it had informed the court about certain irregularities but denied reports it was seeking to have the party shut down.

The CHP has been under increasing pressure since it won control of Turkiye's largest cities during local elections in March 2024.

Since then, 16 of its mayors have been jailed.

In October, an Ankara court dismissed a case challenging the legitimacy of the outcome of the party's 2023 leadership primary, saying there was no legal basis to remove the current leadership from office.

The move could have unseated Ozel, who is himself facing several lawsuits, including one for insulting the president.—AFP

Hungarian-British author David Szalay wins Booker Prize

LONDON: David Szalay won the Booker Prize for his novel *Flesh* on Monday, becoming the first Hungarian-British author to win one of the top awards in the English-speaking world.

Written in spare prose, characterised by brevity and a lack of unnecessary detail, the book follows a man caught in a series of events beyond his control over decades. It charts his rise from a housing estate in Hungary to the mansions of London's super-rich.

"A meditation on class, power, intimacy, migration and masculinity, *Flesh* is a compelling portrait of one man, and the formative experiences that can reverberate across a lifetime," organisers of the award ceremony in London said in a statement.

In addition to the 50,000-pound ($67,000) prize for the winner, as well as a 2,500-pound awards to each of the shortlisted authors and translators, the writers also gain a boost in popularity and benefit from increased book sales.

"Even though my father is Hungarian, I never felt entirely at home in Hungary. I suppose, I'm always a bit of an outsider there and living away from the UK and London for so many years I also had a similar feeling about London," Szalay told *BBC Radio*.

"I really wanted to write a book that stretched between Hungary and London and involved a character who was not quite at home in either place."

The novel was the Canadian-born author's sixth work of fiction. He was shortlisted in 2016 for his book *All That Man Is* which told the story of nine men at various life stages.

"We had never read anything quite like it. It is, in many ways, a dark book but it is a joy to read," Roddy Doyle, chair of judges this year, said in the statement shared by the organisers.

"I don't think I've read a novel that uses the white space on the page so well. It's as if the author ... is inviting the reader to fill the space, to observe almost to create the character with him."—Reuters

BRITAIN'S Queen Camilla with Booker prize winner David Szalay during a reception at Clarence House in London.—Reuters

Iraqis go to the polls, but sceptical of any change

BAGHDAD: Iraqis began casting ballots on Tuesday in parliamentary elections to choose a new 329-member legislature, state television said, with nationwide estimates putting the turnout at 55 per cent.

Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani seeks a second term in an exercise that a growing young electorate increasingly views as a vehicle for established parties to divide up the Middle East nation's oil wealth.

Sudani's bloc is forecast to win the most seats but fall short of a majority, potentially meaning months of post-election talks among Shi'ite and Sunni Muslim as well as Kurdish parties to divvy up government posts and pick a prime minister.

Elections in Iraq are increasingly marked by low turnout. Many voters have lost faith in a system that has failed to break a pattern of state capture by powerful parties with armed loyalists, while ordinary Iraqis complain of endemic corruption, poor services, and unemployment.

Turnout hit a record low in is projected by analysts and pollsters to slip below a record low of 41% in 2021, thanks partly to general disillusionment and to a boycott by populist Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who counts hundreds of thousands of voters among his core support base. The vote this year features a raft of young candidates hoping to break into politics, but their chances against old patronage networks are uncertain.

"This election will not depend on popularity. It will depend on spending money," former prime minister Haider al-Abadi said during a televised interview last month.

Analysts warn that low participation among civilians could further erode confidence in a system critics say benefits the few while neglecting the many.

"For Iraq's 21 million registered voters, Tuesday's ballot may do little more than endorse a familiar political order," said Baghdad-based political analyst Ahmed Younis.—Reuters

Ponzi scheme mastermind jailed in UK

LONDON: The mastermind of a vast Ponzi scheme in China, which conned nearly 130,000 investors, was jailed in Britain on Tuesday for over 11 years for laundering the proceeds of the fraud into cryptocurrency now worth billions of dollars.

Qian Zhimin pleaded guilty to two money laundering charges in September, after an investigation during which British police seized more than 61,000 bitcoin currently worth over $6 billion in one of the largest ever cryptocurrency seizures.

Qian wept in the dock as judge Sally-Ann Hales sentenced her to 11 years and eight months, saying: "You were the architect of this offending from its inception to its conclusion ... your motive was one of pure greed."

Prosecutors said Qian and her co-conspirators spent more than 95 million renminbi ($13.34m) on jewellery from the proceeds of the fraud.

While the criminal proceedings have finished, there remains a looming legal battle over the fate of the seized bitcoin and how the victims of the fraud are repaid, with British prosecutors mulling a compensation scheme for victims.

Qian's lawyers say she never intended to defraud anyone and that the "astronomic rise in the value of bitcoin means it will greatly exceed the amount needed to compensate victims".

Massive investment fraud

Qian, 47, changed her pleas on what was due to be the first day of her trial, admitting possessing and transferring criminal property. She previously claimed she was the target of a Chinese government "crackdown on successful crypto entrepreneurs".

Prosecutors say Qian ran an investment fraud through her Lantian Gerui company between 2014 and 2017, into which around 128,000 people invested roughly 40bn renminbi ($5.62bn), about six billion of which was siphoned off. More than 80 people were convicted in China.

Qian fled China via Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Malaysia, before she flew to London on a St Kitts and Nevis passport and began trying to convert bitcoin bought with the proceeds of the fraud into cash, prosecutors said.—Reuters

Planned Gaza force shaping up despite internal warning

Continued from Page 1

Trump peace plan into the draft, signalling the United States' dominant role in shaping the international effort.

Yet the initiative faces significant diplomatic and practical obstacles. Several countries remain cautious: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) cites legal uncertainties and has refused participation until they are addressed; Jordan has ruled out deploying troops; Azerbaijan says it will join only if a full ceasefire is in place; and Turkey has been excluded at Israel's insistence.

Indonesia, Pakistan, and other Muslim-majority states that appear willing to contribute forces are also concerned. While they are open to participating in a UN-mandated mission, they "do not want to be a joint B team of the Israeli military focused solely on disarming Hamas," a UN diplomat explained.

Israel, too, has begun voicing complaints that it is being sidelined, with its liaison unit effectively restricted to limited aid delivery rather than full participation in force planning.

Into this complex mix comes the World Bank's endorsement. In a letter to Washington, Bank President Ajay Banga affirmed that the institution "backs language in the US-drafted resolution" authorising the two-year BOP mandate and allowing the Bank's operational engagement in Gaza.

The draft explicitly calls on the Bank and other financial institutions to provide resources for reconstruction, including the establishment of a dedicated trust fund governed by donors. Estimates for Gaza's rebuilding costs have recently been revised upwards to roughly US$70 billion.

Meanwhile, US media reports on Tuesday revealed deep internal concerns within the Trump administration over the feasibility of the broader peace deal underpinning the resolution.

Documents obtained by Politico show that the administration convened a two-day symposium last month in southern Israel with around 400 participants, drawn from the RAND Corporation, NGOs, and the State and Defence Departments, alongside a newly formed Civil-Military Coordination Center. The event, led by Michael Fenzel, the US security coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority, featured 67 slides across six segments.

Participants were reportedly "concerned about whether a so-called International Stabilisation Force — a multinational initiative meant to maintain peace in Gaza — can realistically be deployed," the report noted.

Materials obtained by Politico included situation reports on Gaza, advisory documents from the Blair Institute, led by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and internal government slides. A US defence official told the newspaper that the documents "reflect the administration's close-held concerns" about the region's future. The Blair Institute declined to comment on its involvement but stressed its documents were factual assessments, not policy advocacy.

The report observed that "the mood behind the scenes is more guarded than public statements suggest," noting that challenges remain in securing troop commitments, clarifying legal and governance frameworks, raising reconstruction funding, and achieving buy-in from Hamas and regional states.

State Department spokesperson Eddie Vasquez, however, dismissed this assessment. "Everyone wants to be part of President Trump's historic Middle East peace effort," he told Politico.

"From the moment President Trump announced his 20-point plan, there has been an avalanche of ideas … The Trump administration will continue to uphold the ceasefire and effectively implement the plan," he added.